



A revival for door-to-door marketing

NASHVILLE, Tenn., Nov. 10 - Now that the national do-not-call list makes it impossible to reach millions of potential customers, some marketing companies are returning to an old-fashioned alternative: door-to-door salespeople.

That puts Michael Mullen on marketing's new frontier. He knocks on doors in the Nashville area, makes his pitch and, in a good week, earns about \$650 selling discount coupon books.

While they may not be as effective as telemarketing, door-to-door sales calls are growing in importance.

"When the lady of the house answers, I say, 'I'm sincere, ma'am, and if I weren't 100 percent sincere, I wouldn't be standing in front of you,'" Mullen said. "It's a numbers game. This is what I do six days a week from 11:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m."

While they may not be as effective as telemarketing, door-to-door sales calls are growing in importance. For now, however, they appear concentrated among certain types of businesses, especially telecommunications.

AT&T spokesman Bob Nersesian said the telecom company made door-to-door sales part of its marketing mix several years before the do-not-call list became effective Oct. 1.

"We target customers who might be willing to change their local service," he said.

Michael Coe, a spokesman for SBC Communications in New York, said the company tested door-to-door sales in the Midwest for both residential and small business customers.

"If it's something customers like, then we'll look at its effectiveness," he said. "We just started a month or two ago, and we're now getting comments that will allow us to make an assessment."

Other factors besides the do-not-call list have prompted companies to put sales staff back on the street. Unsolicited e-mail annoys most computer users, and improved spam-blockers makes the tactic less effective. And it's hard to persuade customers to visit a company's Web site.

"I think companies are looking for new distribution channels for their products," said Amy Robinson, a spokeswoman for the Direct Selling Association, a Washington, D.C.-based trade group. "Direct selling has traditionally been undervalued by Wall Street, but many realize its strength. It's a niche market, but \$28.7 billion in sales last year make it nothing to scoff at."

In some cases, the modern face-to-face pitch is a soft sell. RCN Corp. of Princeton, N.J., seeks only to schedule an appointment to discuss the company's phone service at a future date.

"We compete with the Comcasts and Verizons of the world so we have to be very approachable," said Rachel Leone, RCN's director of marketing and sales in Boston. "The direct sales force gets those hard-to-reach people that we probably wouldn't get over the phone."

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But door-to-door has its limits because it's expensive and inefficient, said Walter Janowski, an analyst for the Gartner Group in Stamford, Conn.

“Door-to-door sales require full-time bodies who need cars and training — and they can only hit so many people in a day,” he said. “With telemarketing, there’s a national law, but with door-to-door, you’re down to the town level. It would be difficult for anyone to do this on a significant scale.”

Door-to-door sales people also can run into similar problems as telemarketers — laws, most of them local, that limit or ban soliciting. Some residential communities and urban apartment complexes prohibit it. Some towns require permits or have other restrictions, as in Rockville Centre, N.Y., which keeps a “do-not-knock” list that residents can join.

Nonprofit organizations, including churches, are exempt from the do-not-call list and are likely to stay with telemarketing rather than use door-to-door selling.

Aaron Morgan, pastor of New Vision Church of God in Johnson City, Tenn., said his 30-member church recently spent \$3,000 to make 20,600 calls. Response was good, and new members are beginning to join the church.

Telemarketing is “more efficient than going door-to-door — and no one in the church wanted to do that any more,” Morgan said.

For some companies, door-to-door sales isn't a new idea. Kirby vacuum cleaners have always been sold face-to-face since the company started 90 years ago.

“The company doesn't do any telemarketing,” said Rob Shumay, Kirby's vice president for consumer and public relations in Cleveland. “We knock on doors and set up appointments. If we call back, we always get a card saying that we have permission to call.”

In Nashville, Mullen doesn't see his job as the wave of the future.

“I just do something most other people aren't willing to do,” he said. “I keep a picture of my daughter with me so when somebody slams the door on me I can look at it and say, 'Am I going to let this person nag me out, or am I going to make some money?'”

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